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SUBJECT: NAJAF POLICE CHIEF CONTINUES TO COURT CONTROVERSY

Classified By: Greta Holtz, OPA Director, for Reasons 1 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Najaf reporting cable.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT. Najaf police chief MG Karim continues to hold onto his job, despite having become a lightning rod for criticism in the province. Governor Zurfi has been forthright in expressing his wish to have Karim replaced, and several members of the Provincial Council have complained about the police chief's leadership style. Karim also has his supporters, including the Najaf Chief Justice and the Director General of the province's Human Rights Ministry, both of whom give the police chief high marks for his efforts. While Karim may not be perfect, many credit him with having improved security in Najaf over the last several years, making Najaf one of the safest of Iraq's provinces. Even if Karim's departure becomes inevitable, dismissing him before the elections could inject instability into a relatively peaceful part of the country. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

THE NAJAF POLICE FORCE AND ITS LEADER

¶3. (C) MG Karim heads the 15,000-member police force of Najaf Province) a force with only four battalions, compared to twenty-three, for example, in Basra. Because his police training center in Najaf has been out of reach of USG police trainers since the 2006, when U.S. troops initially withdrew from the city, his officers have not received the same level of equipment and training as other Iraqi police. (NOTE: Najaf was one of the first provinces to come under Iraqi government control, with the withdrawal of coalition forces in 2006. However, because of insecurity in the city after 2006, Najaf police went to Hillah for USG police training. END NOTE.) The force provides security for the millions of religious pilgrims that visit the province during Shi'a religious festivals. In addition, the police protect the Governor, Provincial Council members, and PRT movements into Najaf city. Despite significant challenges, over the past two years Najaf has become one of the most secure provinces in the country.

WHO IS KARIM?

¶4. (C) Karim, a former career soldier and Badr Corps member, has by all appearances made the transition to successful police chief. He has said he wants a professional police force that will not violate human rights, but will serve the people and a democratic Iraq. He has voiced to the Governor his criticism of ISCI's efforts to quash warrants and otherwise interfere in police business, and he was one of the first supporters of the PRT's legal assistance program for detainees. In meetings with USG officials, he has expressed concerns over conditions in Najaf's overcrowded detention facilities, supported the PRT's legal assistance program for detainees, and called for a modern forensic lab in Najaf in order to wean police from dependence on more traditional interrogation techniques. Karim, who lost a leg in a terrorist attack, also demonstrated personal courage in

directing police actions against the Soldiers of Heaven, a Shi'a militia that fought an intense battle with Iraqi and coalition forces in January 2007. During an October 26 meeting with PRToffs, Najaf Director General (DG) of the Ministry of Human Rights Fadl Al Garawi gave unprompted praise to Karim for cooperating with his ministry and several non-governmental organizations in carrying out human rights training as part of Najaf's police academy instruction. The DG praised human rights conditions in Najaf, and also noted he had never experienced any difficulties in conducting monthly inspections of police detention facilities.

Qmonthly inspections of police detention facilities.

IRAQI ARMY AND U.S. MILITARY CONCERNS

15. (S) In May 2009, a U.S. soldier was killed in an IED attack on a convoy near the entrance to FOB Endeavor outside of Najaf city. The U.S. military maintains lingering concerns about Karim's possible complicity in the incident, due in part to their dissatisfaction with the subsequent police investigation, and also because of the proximity of two police checkpoints to the scene of the explosion. (COMMENT: There were several potential culprits, with the incident coming towards the end of the implementation of the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement. In addition, a new governor had just been seated after six months of political wrangling and uncertainty following the January provincial elections. END COMMENT.)

16. (S) The Iraqi Army's 8th Division Commander and some within the U.S. military have claimed that Karim was pulling his punches and collaborating with authorities who were

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opposing some proposed military sweeps against militants in the province. Local officials in turn questioned the quality of the Iraqi Army's intelligence. During late 2008 and early 2009, both the Governor and Provincial Council pursued a policy of negotiation and attempted reconciliation sanctioned by Prime Minister Maliki to bring the Shi'a militant groups aligned with Muqtada al-Sadr into the political process. The result of these efforts in Najaf appears to have set the stage for a peaceful provincial election and subsequent transfer of power within the Provincial Council from ISCI to Dawa. In addition, when Basra and Sadr City experienced serious unrest in April 2008, Najaf remained relatively calm.

WRANGLING OVER SECURITY FOR OFFICIALS

17. (S) Karim has faced constant pressure from senior provincial officials to provide more security than directed by a central government edict. Governor Zurfi has asked for double his allotted five officers, and most of the Provincial Council members are clamoring for more as well. Two hundred officers already serve on protective details, and to increase that number Karim would have to reduce neighborhood police patrols. The head of the Provincial Council's Security Committee, Dr. Luai Juwad Hussein Salamn al Yasiri of the Dawa party, recently commented to PRToffs that Karim lacked the charisma to lead the police force of Najaf, although, he also insisted he had no problem with Karim's character or political impartiality. He added that Karim would have been dismissed already if only they had a good replacement waiting to take over. (NOTE: Former Governor Asad, when responding to pressure from the Iraqi Army and U.S. military to remove Karim, also said he could not consider replacing Karim unless he had a successor lined up. END NOTE.)

NAJAF'S CHIEF JUSTICE: KARIM "RIGHT MAN FOR THE JOB"

18. (C) In a recent meeting, Najaf Chief Justice Firhoon told PRToffs that Karim was the right man for the job. He commended the care Karim had taken with the security of

judges and courthouses, and expressed satisfaction with the speed with which Karim executed court-approved arrest warrants. Najaf Integrity Commission Director al-Fitla echoed Firhoon's opinions, stating that the police had been very helpful in supporting their activities and security.

COMMENT: RECOMMENDATION OF INCREASED TRAINING SUPPORT

19. (S) COMMENT. Governor Zurfi has clearly stated he would like to see Karim go. Given the weight of the Governor's opinion in the province, Karim's departure may become inevitable. It would be imprudent, however, to take any such action in the run-up to the January 2010 parliamentary elections, particularly given the lack of a suitable replacement. Whether Karim stays or goes, the PRT recommends an expanded coalition police training effort for Najaf based out of FOB Endeavor. The Najaf Police Force has not received attention commensurate with its strategic location, and both Karim and Governor Zurfi would welcome additional support. Moreover, U.S.-provided training would support stability in what remains a sensitive region of the country. END COMMENT.

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